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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001871

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR JHARRIS AND MBLONG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2018

TAGS: PREL EG IS LE PGOV SA

SUBJECT: SAUDI PUBLIC OUTRAGED OVER GAZA

REF: A. RIYADH 1868

1B. 06 RIYADH 5876

Classified By: CDA David Rundell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

KEY POINTS:

-- (U) Saudi public anger at the high casualties resulting from Israeli strikes on Gaza is strong and growing.

-- (U) Official SAG condemnations and humanitarian assistance to Palestinian victims have thus far not been sufficient to mollify a public openly frustrated that its government can not or will not use its relationship with the U.S. to stop Israeli aggression.

-- (U) The official religious establishment has responded with calls for special prayers for the people of Gaza, while a popular independent Imam has called for retribution against Israel and Israeli interests.

--(C) The SAG will manage (and retain control of) the situation by allowing some safe venting while firmly muzzling troublemakers.

11. (U) OFFICIAL CONDEMNATIONS: Saudi King Abdallah, Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal and other officials have strongly condemned the Israeli action and called on the U.S. to intervene to end the bloodshed. The King received Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at his farm outside Riyadh on December 27, and ordered medical assistance for Gaza and planes to transport casualties to the Kingdom for treatment in Saudi hospitals. The King traveled to Muscat on December 29 to attend a GCC summit, where he and other Saudis will attempt to orchestrate joint GCC action in support of the Palestinians.

12. (U) AND PRAYERS: The Grand Mufti, Abdul-Aziz al-Sheikh, has called for "Qunut" prayers -- prayers offered to mitigate suffering and hardship. While generally meant for large Friday services, mosques throughout the country have already began conducting heavily-attended prayer services. Additionally, Mosques have collected donations and urged blood donations at area hospitals. As of noon, December 29, there were reports that blood donors were being turned away due to the already large number of volunteers.

13. (C) AND UNOFFICIAL OUTRAGE: Embassy contacts report widespread anger among all strata of Saudi society:

--at Israel for what is seen as disproportionate and unjustified violence against defenseless Palestinian

civilians,

--at the United States for not halting Israel's strikes, and

--at their own government for failing to apply pressure on the US to control Israel.

¶4. (C) One contact lamented that "the United States promise for peace by the end of the year is broken." Saudis have expressed anger via the internet, their cell phones, in private comments and in heavily-attended mosque prayer services, but not in street demonstrations. There was a small demonstration in Qatif (Ref A) prior to the Israeli action and a group of activists plan to request permission to gather in Riyadh on Wednesday December 31. (Comment: while we believe more gatherings are possible in the Eastern Province, we don't expect the SAG to allow large-scale protests elsewhere. End comment.)

¶5. (C) AND FRUSTRATION: In addition to condemning Israel and the US, comments on many Saudi websites also expressed frustration with Saudi government "inaction." Some commentators openly criticized the SAG and other Arab governments for not "standing up to" the United States. A number of comments dismissed the Grand Mufti's calls for Qunut prayers as insufficient, and requests for donations as useless. Cell phone text messages have been circulating furiously throughout the country. While many messages confined themselves to religious quotes, others have openly called for vengeance. One popular text read: "This is a reminder to pray for mercy for the martyrs in Gaza, and pray

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for victory for those holding fast in the face of the offenders. Pray that God the powerful takes revenge of those allying with enemies." Other messages reflected widespread frustration with perceived Arab government inaction: "People of Gaza wonder if the sky is falling on them or the earth is shaking underneath them. We say may the Lord be with you Gaza because those who are on the top of the pyramids have sold their religious for their worldly life. They deserted pride, honor, wisdom, shame and responsibility. They chose the company of betrayal. They forgot the words of Caliph Omar (the third Caliph in Islam) who used to say, 'if a sheep is hurt in Iraq I will be responsible for it on the day of judgment.'"

¶6. (U) AND A MAVERICK IMAM?: Popular Saudi cleric Sheik Awad al-Qarni published an inflammatory call for retaliation on his website, www.resalah.net: "All (Israeli) interests, and anything else related to Israel, are permitted targets for Muslims everywhere.... They (Israelis) should become targets. Their blood should be shed as the blood of our brothers in Palestine has been shed.... They should feel pain more than our brothers." Though Al-Qarni characterized his call as a "fatwa," or religious ruling, the statement has no official standing in Saudi Arabia, where only the Council of Senior Ulama or the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia are permitted to issue official religious rulings.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: DEJA VU? The Saudi public reaction to events unfolding in Gaza is similar to the response to the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 (Ref B). Then, as now, the public was furious not only at Israel and the U.S., but also at the SAG for its perceived inaction. At that time, the Saudi leadership's initial inclination to blame Hizballah for provoking the Israelis was out of sync with a public horrified by the destruction in Lebanon. This time around strong Saudi government statements have not been sufficient to overcome popular frustration with what many see as empty rhetoric and government unwillingness to use its influence with the U.S. The SAG is well aware of public dissatisfaction, and will likely look for ways to allow for some venting of public unhappiness, while seeking to muzzle those with an interest in stoking popular anger to undermine the government.

RUNDELL